



CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

NEWS RELEASE

Department of Toxic Substances Control

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DTSC Kicks Off “Partnerships for Mercury Pollution Prevention Project” With Mercury Thermometer Exchange at Community Clinic

San Diego --- Ed Lowry, Director of the California Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC) helped kick off DTSC's new “Partnerships for Mercury Pollution Prevention Project” by participating in a mercury thermometer exchange today at the Operation Samahan Community Clinic in National City. The project will include local clinics in San Diego, Escondido, Encinitas, and La Mesa in addition to other clinics statewide.

“This is an innovative project that enables community residents to exchange their mercury-containing thermometers for safe, non-mercury ones. It brings together doctors, environmental regulators and the public in an effort to reduce the amount of mercury in our environment,” said Lowry.

The Partnerships for Mercury Pollution Prevention Project is a unique collaboration between DTSC, Physicians for Social Responsibility-Los Angeles (PSR-LA), and community clinics in California. The project is funded by a grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The project will also assist community clinics serving low-income clients, to reduce their use of mercury-containing devices and will promote pollution prevention by exchanging mercury blood pressure gauges at these clinics. Patients can exchange their mercury-containing thermometers for non-mercury devices at participating clinics. Clinic staff members will obtain information about exposure, safe disposal methods and mercury pollution prevention through training workshops sponsored by the project.

The project will:

- Divert up to approximately 32.3 pounds of mercury from the medical waste stream
- Remove up to 14.3 pounds of mercury from the municipal waste stream through collection of mercury fever thermometers from patients
- Improve regulatory compliance with mercury-bearing waste disposal requirements
- Reduce the number of medical-containing medical devices from entering the solid waste stream through increased compliance with new requirements for proper handling and disposal of mercury-containing products
- Help increase information sharing between health care providers working at the community clinics, hospitals, residency programs
- Help increase information sharing within communities where clinic trainings are held
- Provide information on mercury pollution prevention, risks, and exposure prevention to community clinic patients via clinic staff

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Mercury is a persistent, bioaccumulative heavy metal toxin that is a State and national pollution prevention priority. Inhaling elemental mercury vapor from broken thermometers and medical equipment, such as blood pressure gauges, may affect the gastrointestinal, respiratory, and central nervous systems.

Mercury-containing devices used in the health-care setting are often disposed of improperly allowing mercury to migrate to air, water, and land. Environmental mercury releases can harm human health and wildlife because it is a potent neurotoxin that can damage the nervous system of a developing fetus. Medical and municipal wastes account for approximately one-third of the total mercury released into the environment. There are typically 84 grams of mercury in a mercury blood pressure gauge. About one gram of mercury, the amount in a single mercury thermometer, may be deposited in a typical 20-acre lake each year from mercury in the atmosphere. Even this small amount, over time, can contaminate the fish in a lake, making them unfit to eat on a regular basis.

While the thermometer exchange program is for clinic patients only, information on where the public can dispose of mercury thermometers is available from local county health departments or by calling 1-800-CLEANUP (1-800-253-2687).

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The Department of Toxic Substances Control's mission is to restore, protect, and enhance the environment and ensure public health, environmental quality and economic vitality by regulating hazardous waste, conducting and overseeing cleanups, and developing and promoting pollution prevention.

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"The energy challenge facing California is real. Every Californian needs to take immediate action to reduce energy consumption. For a list of simple ways you can reduce demand and cut your energy costs, see our Web-site at www.dtsc.ca.gov."